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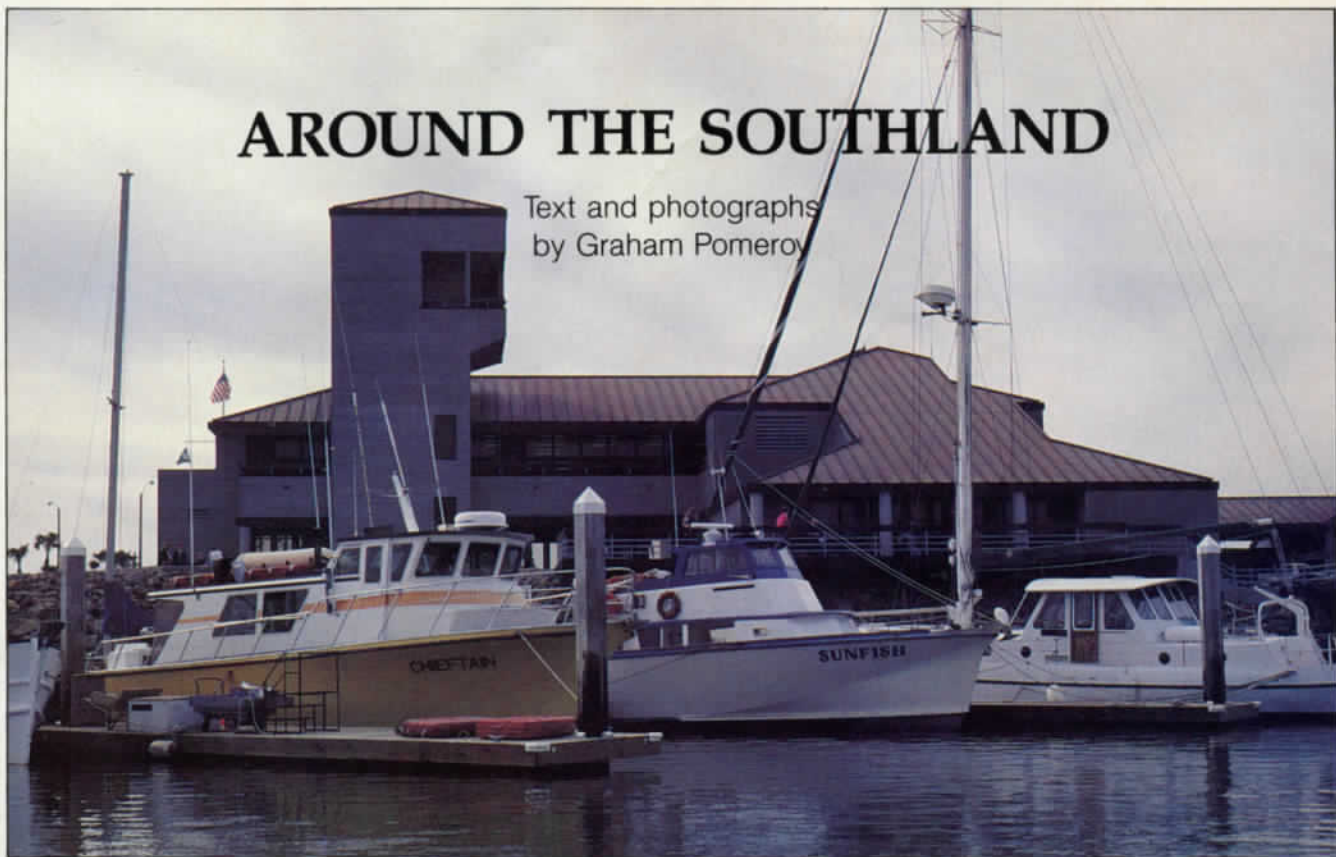
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AUGUST 1983



AROUND THE SOUTHLAND

Text and photographs
by Graham Pomeroy



Until recently, visiting Southern California's Channel Islands National Park required an ocean crossing. Now you can drive.

In 1982 the park opened its new mainland Visitor Center in Ventura, 60 miles northwest of Los Angeles. Park Superintendent William Ehorn calls it "an island experience without actually going to the islands." The center is the focal point of our 40th national park, which includes five of the eight islands off Southern California.

A good place to begin your tour is in the auditorium, where you can watch the colorful 20-minute film, *Channel Islands, A Treasure in the Sea*. It's presented every half hour, with the last showing an hour before closing time. It helps you to grasp how each island differs from its neighbors and why the Chumash Indians used the islands so extensively centuries ago. You'll discover that Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo visited the Channel Islands—and later died there—just 50 years after Columbus landed in America. Moreover, you'll see why the islands' unique resources deserve to be conserved for many

generations to come.

The northern Channel Islands—Anacapa (actually three small islets), Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel—make up the chain that runs almost parallel to the coast, surfacing 14 miles south of Ventura and continuing 55 miles to the west. On a clear day you can see one or more of the islands for miles as you drive along the coast. Even on the clearest day though, you'll have difficulty spotting the fifth island, Santa Barbara. It lies almost 50 miles off the Ventura coast.

The park was set up to include a one-mile administrative boundary around each of the five islands, and several areas in Ventura are set aside for its Administrative Headquarters and Visitor Center. Although the park is new, the Anacapa and Santa Barbara islands have been federally protected since the 1930s when Congress deemed them Channel Islands National Monument. It wasn't until 1980, however, that President Carter signed legislation authorizing Channel Islands to be designated a national park.

The main exhibit hall, though

Channel Islands' new Visitor Center brings the islands to the shoreline. The center's main exhibit hall (right) puts landlubbers in touch with plants and animals found nowhere else in the world. During the summer months Island Packers, at Ventura's marina, takes adventurous visitors to where it's all happening

small, provides excellent explanations of the park's natural wonders. Illustrations of island plants and animals hang throughout the hall. The islands grow some 85 species of plants that are listed on the California Native Plant Society's rare-and-endangered list. Ocean residents include 20 species of cetaceans (whales and porpoises). Inhabitants of both sea and shore are the pinnipeds (seals and sea lions), which once abounded along the coast. Now they breed and pup almost exclusively on the Channel Islands. Six pinniped species take turns using the beaches of San Miguel for sunning or molting. Up to five species breed there—more species than anywhere in the world.

With this abundance of life, it's no wonder that the area was designated a national marine sanctuary.

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AROUND THE SOUTHLAND

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Just months after the park was established, its sanctuary status permitted a six-mile area of protection around each island. This ocean sanctuary is valued because of its special climate. The islands lie between the cold California current and the warmer Southern California countercurrent.

Here, both northern and southern species of marine plants and animals make their homes. Even more unusual, they have adapted to the food sources and water temperatures that each ocean river

The exhibits in the main hall are presented differently from most centers; they're not behind glass. Instead, signs read "please touch." The center encourages its visitors to get involved. At the tidepool exhibit, you can touch a sea anemone, look for the resident lobster, and feel an undersea plant that commonly grows several feet in a day. A park service guide usually offers an informal talk about the plants and animals of the tidepool. "Wet your hands before handling them," she advises. Children jump at the chance for hands-on exploring and adults soon follow.

From here, you pass to a display of Indian artifacts. The Chumash lived on the larger Channel Islands and used resources from all of them. They traveled between the islands and to the mainland in canoes called *tomols*. The *tomols*, made by lashing planks together and sealing them with pine pitch and asphaltum, proved fast and seaworthy. Some archeologists claim they were one of the most advanced achievements of all the early North American cultures.

Another display shows one of the many fascinating geologic resources in the park: the caliche "ghost forest" found on San Miguel. Actually, it looks more like an eerie outer-space landscape than a forest. Caliche is the calcified root casting of vegetation. It's created when sand, composed mostly of lime skeletons of millions of sea creatures, is blown over the land. Once there, it chemically reacts with a plant's acids. After the plant decomposes, the cemented casting remains. Some castings are thought to be over 14,000 years old, while others are forming today over living plants. It's the fastest-growing fossil-like formation known.

Also represented in a display are the many seabirds that breed within the park. One example is the California brown pelican. Anacapa Island is the only coastal area in the western United States where it consistently nests.

The final exhibit is the terrestrial display. A high proportion of the is-

lands' species are classified as rare, threatened or endangered, many existing nowhere else in the world. The gentle island fox, for example, makes its home on the six largest islands. Each island has its own variety of this species.

The center's photo displays change often. Each return trip can provide you with new insights. The center has an outside terrace with picnic tables, where you can enjoy a leisurely lunch overlooking the harbor. You can bring your lunch or buy sandwiches and beverages at the delicatessen next door. While you're outside, be sure to look at the variety of island plants. A self-guided tour starts in front of the

**Anacapa Island is
the only place
chosen repeatedly
by the brown
pelican.**

center near the main entrance.

To get an overall view of the islands, take the elevator or climb the stairs to the center's observation tower on the third floor. An open-air platform supports two telescopes. Anacapa and Santa Cruz islands are visible on a clear day. But even a telescope doesn't allow you to see the islands in detail.

Requests from at least 10,000 monthly visitors resulted in a new service: Island Packer Cruises. Located next to the Visitor Center, the boat operation will let you see at least one of the islands first-hand. Seven days a week you can take an all-day trip (9 to 5) to Anacapa, which includes a four-hour stop-over on the island. From May 1 to September 15 this is the only service allowed to land on Anacapa. Cost is \$24 for adults, \$12 for children 12 and under. Reservations must be made within 30 days of a weekend trip. On Saturdays you can take a morning or afternoon half-day trip to see seals, sea lions and birds and Anacapa's north shore (no landing on this trip). Cost is \$13 for adults,



Young visitors try their hands at grinding a bowl at hands-on Indian artifact exhibit

brings. An additional feature of this environment is what is called an "upwelling." Near the Channel Islands the nutrient-rich waters from the ocean depths flow upwards. This upwelling helps support the food web for much of the diverse wildlife in the sanctuary.

To learn more about this fascinating area, you'll want to browse through the hall's book section. An excellent introduction to the park is Peter C. Howarth's *Channel Islands: The Story Behind the Scenery*. The full-color magazine-sized book presents a concise and entertaining explanation of the wildlife, geology and history of these unique islands. At three dollars, it's a bargain. (You can also pick it up at other national parks that sell the *Story Behind the Scenery* series, or order direct from KC Publications, Box 14883, Las Vegas, Nevada, 89114.)


\$6.50 for children 12 and under.

If you're looking for more adventure, ask about a windjammer sail to the islands. (For reservations and information, write: Island Packers, 1867 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, CA 93001 or call (805) 642-1393). For sightseeing only, other charter boats leave from Oxnard and the city of Santa Barbara. Details are available at the center.

Another way of visiting the islands is on your own boat. Landing permits are required in many areas, including privately owned Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa. Facilities are sparse, French's Cove landing offering the best. (Permits are not required for day trips to Anacapa with Island Packers.) Only those with substantial ocean experience should attempt to explore the islands on their own. Weather changes rapidly and protected coves can become dangerous without apparent warning. Good skills, including knowledge of anchoring and navigation, are a must. Crossings in small open boats should not be attempted.

These warnings may seem a little strong, but part of the reason the islands have become a national park is because they are rugged and isolated. In fact, until the Visitor Center opened, relatively few people got a chance to conveniently learn about Channel Islands National Park.

Summer hours are 8:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. daily. Admission is free. To get to the center, take the Seaward Avenue off-ramp when heading south on U.S. 101, or the Victoria Avenue off-ramp when heading north. From each exit the route to the park is clearly marked. The center is several miles from either off-ramp and is located at the Ventura Marina. If you're heading west on State 126, once you get to 101 continue north the few miles to Seaward. Then turn toward the ocean and follow the signs.

For more information, write: Channel Islands National Park, 1901 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, CA 93001, or call (805) 644-8157. It's a good idea to confirm hours. 

The Brave Birds


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everything is always ready.

There are five jet helicopters based at the Roland Barton heliport and shuttled to outlying fire camps. Four are the big Huey types used extensively during the Vietnam War. The fifth is a sleek Bell Jet Ranger used as a command ship and for fast ambulance flights. The ships are pampered, inspected, fueled and ready to fly. The whole operation is blue ribbon, from top to bottom. Pride shows everywhere. The pilots in their ready room and the mechanics in the shop even good-naturedly argue about whose coffee is best.

Civic and aviation officials from all over the world come to admire the operation and take home ideas for their own emergency programs. Some visiting pilots invited to accompany missions have done so with a somewhat pale and anxious look. They have gone home, relieved to fly where the mountains are not so steep, the winds not so ferocious and the brush fires not so hot and stubborn.

Whatever the mission, the Los Angeles County crews and their birds do it the hard way and they do it better all the time. They have perfected the use of light-amplifying goggles and infrared sensors originally developed for the military to use in combat. With the equipment, fires can be fought at night; air operations used to have to shut down during hours of darkness. Since a water tank is emptied when its trap is opened, a switch from one large water tank to two half-tanks has enabled fire fighters to hit two fire targets each time up and reduce the number of reloading trips. Crews have built and tested lifting slings and equipment which permit almost unbelievable rescues.

With luck, you'll never need the use of Los Angeles County Fire Department helicopters. But if you do you'll realize how fortunate residents are to have these big birds coming down out of the sky during times of disaster. 



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